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The momentum of studies of 11th- to early 13th-century polychrome wood sculptures in Europe

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The publication of this volume, a product of the 4th international Medieval conference, “Medieval Europe in Motion, the Middle Ages: a Global Context” is a welcome opportunity to increase the momentum of study of 11th- to early 13th-century polychrome wood sculptures in Europe. While research on contemporaneous monumental stone sculptures and the distinctly smaller ivory statues has been widely disseminated, the inventory, stylistic and typological interrelation, as well as chronological classification of polychrome wooden sculptures, lag far behind. The scope for this body of research remains purposefully imprecise, as the time window for these sculptures is ill defined. While the term “Romanesque” usually encompasses sculptures produced anywhere around 1000 with a terminal date equally indistinct around 1200, it may also include sculptures retaining earlier qualities into the 11th century, or a “Romanesque” character well into the early 13th century, depending on regions. The definition of Romanesque, while intrinsically inadequate, needs to remain broad to facilitate discussion, and inversely the study of sculptures requires increased precision to establish new perspectives¹.

Polychrome wood sculptures have remained a challenge to past and present scholars, as they are inherently in poor state of condition and rarely reflect their former original splendor. The era’s artistic production is also incomplete as many such sculptures have been lost. Painted wood, especially when three dimensional, is characteristically unstable, prone to deterioration from insect attacks, environmental fluctuations, fire, and past restorations including overpainting or paint removal as related to changes in

¹ BARRAL I ALTET, Xavier – *Contre l’Art roman? Essai sur un passé réinventé*. Paris: Fayard 2006; MAXWELL, Robert; AMBROSE, Kirk – *Current directions in eleventh- and twelfth- century sculptures studies*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010; GABORIT, Jean-René – *La sculpture romane*. Paris: Hazan, 2010.

devotional practices or taste. Lightweight and easily transported, few of these sculptures retain their original architectural and liturgical context, with many without precise origin, now relocated in other parishes, museums or private collections.

This collection of essays represents the work of a number of specialists in Europe, both art historians and conservators, who are engaged in the study of medieval sculptures. While Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Norway are represented, not every country with an important tradition of medieval wood sculpture could participate, although mentioned in many articles. Each author demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the subjects' historiography, but mostly focuses on direct observation of the physical objects, using scientific methods of examination to answer questions of original construction, carving techniques, and painting methods. Besides art historical theories and stylistic analysis, most authors address the questions of dating and relative chronology, employing dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating (¹⁴C), combined with stratigraphic analysis of the paint. For example, the Burgundian *Christ de Nevers* studied by Nadia Bertoni-Cren dated in the past to the early 13th century partly because of the naturalism of its anatomy, is now thought to be a late 12th-century sculpture. Similarly, Emmanuelle Mercier questions the relative chronology of a number of sculptures from the late 10th through the 13th centuries, with for example the *Tancrémont Crucifix* dated in the past to around 1100 and now identified by ¹⁴C as the oldest sculpture in the round in Belgium with a dating around 1000. Other important discoveries are the ¹⁴C validation by Potte *et alii* of the *Christ de Saint Flour*, a sculpture long suspected of post-medieval facture, to the late 12th or early 13th centuries. Finally, recent analysis has confirmed a late 12th-century date to two rare crosses supporting their Crucifix, the Nevers cross in Burgundy (Bertoni-Cren) and the Montsalvy cross in Auvergne (Potte *et alii*). Jordi Camps widens the questions of dating and classification by frequent comparisons of the Spanish polychrome wood sculptures to other artistic media, including goldsmith or enamel works, small ivory figures, monumental stone sculptures as well as murals or paintings.

Camps further considers the question of work production for sculptors, with the possible existence of models or influential prototypes that may have disseminated throughout regions beyond specific artistic workshops, and even the importation of certain works

from foreign lands. While technical similarities of polychrome wood sculptures throughout northern Europe seem to indicate shared artistic processes, materials and techniques identified on sculptures are not always mentioned in medieval treatises, suggesting an active process of oral transmission (Mercier). Despite this uniformity, there is still reason to argue that specific technical markers may be used to define regional workshops. Agnès Blossier and Dominique Faunières for example describe uncanny similarities of materials and techniques on a group of Auvergne crucifixes, clearly pointing to standardized production of a certain prototype by a local atelier (Potte *et alii*). The question of models and copies for Romanesque polychrome sculptures remains a difficult task to address, which will require rigorous and systematic examination of these objects (Kargère in Potte *et alii*)².

The study of the technical aspects of polychrome wood sculptures also brings new data on the question of trades in artist's materials and dissemination of techniques throughout Europe. Unn Plahter and Kaja Kollandsrud confirm the fluent visual vocabulary and material expression of Scandinavian polychrome sculptures, and their common language with those of the western continent, as well as the more distant art of Byzantium. The corpus of remarkably well-preserved Scandinavian sculptures, along with the thoroughly studied Belgian examples, confirm an evolution in carving and painting techniques from the 12th to the 13th centuries, bracketed by earlier or later examples (Plahter/Kollandsrud; Mercier). For carving, the changes transpire in the choice of wood, crack prevention methods during the drying process, joining techniques, or selection of tools. With many gaps preventing a comprehensive documentation of painting techniques throughout Europe, an overview of the northern sculptures indicates a greater but not exclusive use of water miscible media in the 12th century, changing to a full exploitation of oil as a binder in the 13th century, the generally thicker grounds and greater use of glazes in the 13th century, and new pigment choices. For example, lapis lazuli extensively found in the 12th century is generally superseded by azurite in the 13th century; gold, rare in the 12th and usually imitated with glazed tin or silver leaf, becomes more available in the 13th century (Mercier; Plahter/Kollandsrud). The results, although showing clear trends, will benefit from

² BORLÉE, Denise; TERRIER ALIFERIS, Laurence (ed.) – *Les modèles dans l'art du Moyen Âge (XIIe-XVe siècles)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2018.

comparison to painting techniques south of the Alps, as well as to individual case studies and research into workshop practice and regional specificity. Azurite for example has been identified on 12th- to early 13th-century sculptures, notably on the earliest layers of the *Madonna di Acuto* (Fachechi/Bracci), the *Christ of Abbadia San Salvatore* in Italy (Bertoni-Cren), the earliest layers of the *Batló Crucifix*³ and the Burgundian *Christ of Nevers* (Bertoni-Cren).

Beyond results of technical analysis, this collection of essays represents a powerful proof that the breadth of research needed on this corpus of objects should be viewed as a cultural project, requiring the involvement of many different kinds of administrative and cross disciplinary entities. In Italy, very little technical information is available on Romanesque polychrome wood sculptures, as a number of them remain objects of cult in local chapels (Fachechi). Their study would require an interdisciplinary effort, starting with a persuasive message describing the importance of examining these objects on a technical level, with a shared methodology of approach following best standards of analysis. This alone will gain the cooperation of church officials and their parishioners, mayors, cultural governing entities (e.g. DRAC in France or *Soprintendenza per I Beni culturali* in Italy), along with the collaboration of universities, regional and national laboratories, as well as museums. Subsequently, it is with conferences such as the Lisbon Medieval meeting that progress is made in the understanding of these sculptures, where experts have the opportunity to share and debate results of examination.

The field is promising and much remains to be done, starting with a thorough cataloguing and documentation of sculptures, and proceeding with their methodological examination. New avenues of studies encompass archival research into the original provenance of these sculptures, their original architectural context, and active functions in the liturgy. Technical examinations of polychrome wood sculptures facilitate a better understanding of their original appearance as devotional images, where polychromy fulfilled a critical role, either by the symbolic use of color juxtapositions or by the creation of dazzling surfaces to inspire worship. Finally the stratigraphy of later painting

³ CAMPUZANO, Mireia; CARRERAS, Anna; COMELLA, Àngels; MASALLES, Àlex – “Noves aportacions per a l’estudi de la Majestat Batlló: identificació u caracterització de la policromia subjacent”. *Bulleti MNAC* 11 (2010) p. 25.

campaigns and the presence or alteration of reliquary compartments are important indicators of the sculptures' long material and devotional histories.

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